



SYMMETRY'S NEWSLETTER FOR MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS

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THE BALANCE SHEET

Most organizations cite effective communication as a key managerial skill needed to create and maintain a productive work environment. Poor communication is also one of the most commonly identified problem areas in today's workplaces. Studies show that we spend 80 percent of our waking hours communicating with others. With so much time devoted to communication and so much at stake, it is important that we learn to make our efforts as effective as possible at all times.

Understanding Effective Communication

Effective communication is defined as, "the exchange of thoughts producing a desired impression." Listening and providing meaningful feedback are two of the most important components of successful communication.

Traits of a Good Communicator

Examine the behaviors of those who communicate well, and you'll find many common qualities. Effective communicators are:

- Interested in the thoughts and opinions of others
- Interesting to talk to and enthusiastic about diverse topics
- Honest and open
- Not show-offs or name-droppers
- Genuine and down-to-earth
- Focused and to-the-point
- Thoughtful and aware that "how" something is said is as important as "what" is said
- Supportive and able to give credit for the ideas and suggestions of others
- Understanding of the importance of timing
- Able to talk to someone rather than at them
- Skilled at using both verbal and nonverbal cues to let others know how important the conversation is to them

Listening Is Key

Experts say that although almost half of communication is listening, on average most of us listen at just 25 percent of our potential. That means we ignore, forget, distort or misunderstand about 75 percent of what we hear. Many believe this is partly due to the fact that reading, writing and speaking skills are taught and studied far more than the skill of listening.

Learning to Listen

Listening is not the same as hearing. And being a good listener is often not an innate ability, but rather a skill that we must learn and practice. To be an effective listener, you should:

- Physically be a part of the conversation — make eye contact, face the person and use an open body posture
- Ask questions and show interest
- Maintain a friendly voice tone and expression
- Minimize distractions
- Avoid interrupting
- Practice self awareness (example, if you are late for a meeting and find yourself watching the clock, you are probably not listening effectively)
- Pay attention to facts and feelings
- Show respect at all times



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The Role of Feedback

Feedback is defined as, “providing the words and support needed for growth or improvement.” It shouldn’t be an annual event occurring only during a performance evaluation, but rather a continuous conversation to foster a productive workplace.

Too often, people focus solely on the words being used during feedback. In truth, experts say that the actual words are only seven percent of your message. Voice tone (55 percent) and body language (38 percent) are far stronger components of a message.

Providing Effective Feedback

When giving feedback, first consider the best way to deliver your message — a face-to-face conversation, a phone call, an e-mail, a group meeting, etc. While each circumstance is unique, typically a face-to-face conversation will bring the best results.

Timing is also important. Give feedback as soon as possible, but not when emotions are running high. If any of the participants are too upset, it is better to make an appointment for a later time. This will allow you both to calm down, yet ensure that the feedback still occurs.

When giving feedback, describe specific behaviors and avoid making judgments. Explain your reaction and the impact of the behavior on the organization. Be sure to focus only on those behaviors that an employee can change. Stay consistently aware of your tone and body language. Look for any positive aspects and reinforce them as appropriate. Before you conclude your

message, verify that it is understood and include a follow-up plan if needed. Take the time to consider what the person needs as well as what you need. If there are training needs, questions or roadblocks to success, this step will help minimize the necessity for future corrections.

Forms of Feedback

Here are some of the most common forms of feedback:

- **Silence** — Whether you realize it or not, silence can be viewed as a form of feedback, one that presents many risks for misunderstanding. We’ve all heard the adage, “no news is good news.” Most people assume that if no opposition occurs and no concerns are voiced, everything must be okay.
- **Criticism** — This is the least effective form of feedback, although also one of the more common. Synonyms for criticism are “censure,” “disapproval” and “condemnation.” Is it any wonder that when faced with this form of feedback defensiveness, embarrassment and even anger can arise?
- **Advice** — Advice can be a very effective form of feedback as long as it is given at the appropriate time — before an action takes place. Suggestions that can clarify or describe a successful approach can help employees create strategies. When advice is given following the action, it is typically perceived as criticism or second guessing.
- **Reinforcement** — This is the most powerful form of feedback. When we build on the behaviors that are desired by drawing attention to them, we provide an opportunity for employees to know that they are meeting the goal.

For additional information or assistance in promoting effective communication in your organization, please contact SYMMETRY at (800) 236-7905 or (414) 256-4800.



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